The Spanish American War

The Causes

Even before the sinking of the *Maine*, Americans needed little enticement to go to war against Spain in 1898. Not only had Spain been a nemesis of the United States since the 1780s, but also Americans had prized the Spanish territory of Cuba since the early nineteenth century. During the 1850s, filibusters launched against Spanish Cuba from American soil raised tensions between the U. S. and Spain. The latter retaliated by harassing American shipping. In 1854, U. S. ministers to Spain, England, and France drafted the notorious *Ostend Manifesto*, declaring that if Spain would not sell Cuba to the U. S., then the "peace and existence of our cherished Union" justified wresting the island from Spain. When a Cuban revolution erupted in 1868, known as the Ten Years' War, Americans widely supported the cause of the rebels, sending them provisions and arms. Spain again retaliated by stopping and searching American shipping. In 1873, the U. S. and Spain almost went to war when Spain seized a U. S. vessel, the *Virginius*, and subsequently executed its crew for supporting Cuban insurrectionists. Cuba failed to secure its independence in the Ten Years' War, but it would try again in 1895. Spanish brutality in suppressing this new revolution infuriated the American public. The American press further stirred sentiment against Spain. Dubbed "yellow journalism," and led by William Randolph Hearst's *New York Morning Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, the American press whipped up mass sympathy for Cubans and refreshed the long hatred of Spain. Lurid reports and sensational stories of Spanish cruelty and barbarism brought the clamor for intervention in Cuba to a fever pitch. A week before the explosion of the *Maine*, the press had already brought the American people to the brink of war when it published the infamous *De Lome* Letter, an official Spanish correspondence insulting President William McKinley.

Crusading morality and "yellow journalism" were not the only causes of the war with Spain. The closing of the frontier in 1890 not only marked a major milestone in U. S. history, but it also revealed an American restlessness as the nation looked enviously upon Europe's colonial empires. The United States suddenly longed to stretch out across the seas and share in the spoils of imperialism. American business interests heightened this imperialistic surge as they pushed for greater access to foreign markets, and the influence of American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan persuaded Americans of the need for a potent navy and overseas bases. Although the Spanish-American War lasted less than four months, from April to August of 1898, the conflict had considerable import for the future role of the United States in world affairs: the "Splendid Little War," as contemporaries admiringly called the conflict, marked the transition from isolationism to imperialism, as the nation embarked on its road to acquiring overseas possessions.

The Road to War

In March of 1898, the United States began its march to war. Congress voted unanimously for a war fund of $50 million, and it passed resolutions declaring Cuba free and empowering the president to compel Spain to withdraw her army and navy. President McKinley, in turn, asked Spain to cease hostilities in Cuba and demanded negotiations for the independence of the island. Spain flatly refused. The following month, McKinley called for 125,000 volunteers and ordered the blockade of Cuban ports. On April 25, following the recommendations outlined in McKinley's war message, the United States formally declared war against Spain — only after Spain had declared war on the U. S. the previous day. To assuage Cubans, who feared that the United States would acquire Cuba instead of supporting Cuban independence, Congress passed the Teller Amendment, stating that the U. S. had no interest in owning the island. Not since the outbreak of the Civil War, four decades earlier, had public euphoria for the war been so dramatic. Indeed, war with Spain had gone far to reconcile the deep divisions wrought by the Civil War. Union and Confederate veterans heartily joined in defending *Cuba Libre*. American youth of the 1890s, like the generation before in the 1860s, had never experienced war, but they could not wait to heed McKinley's call to enlist.

War in the Pacific

The first shots of the war with Spain occurred at sea, and far from the shores of Cuba. On May 1, 1898, U. S. Commodore George Dewey and his Asiatic Squadron handed America its first victory by annihilating the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in the Philippine Islands. In a matter of a few hours, the U. S. fleet destroyed eleven Spanish vessels and inflicted over 500 casualties, while only suffering one death and eight wounded. The engagement made Dewey into a national hero. Although the Spanish fleet was in decrepit condition, the battle was celebrated as an indication of the skill and potency of the modernized American navy and the preparedness of the Navy Department.

American troops continued to arrive in the Philippines throughout July, landing just south of Manila and establishing Camp Dewey. The only engagement with the Spanish was on the night of July 1. U. S. forces suffered 53 casualties in the firefight. Seeing no hope, the Spanish commander asked to surrender Manila to U. S. forces only, and that the surrender could be done in a manner "honorable" to the Spanish. U. S. generals agreed. On August 14, after a staged bloodless "battle," the Spanish surrendered the city. Filipino insurgents were firmly kept out of Manila. The Philippines were now under the control of the United States, but the war for the islands would not end in 1898.

Moving to Cuba

While the navy had been well prepared for the war, the army was a model of inefficiency and folly. Over 200,000 volunteers had been called up — one million men responded to the call. Combined with 28,000 regulars who had been spread out across the frontier and engaged in policing the Indians, tens of thousands of men began pouring into army camps in Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and California. Here, the infantryman experienced a myriad of distressing conditions: hot and humid weather, boring camp life, poor or rotting food, short supplies of everything, and eventually dysentery, measles, and typhoid. The volunteers were a motley display, donning a mish-mash of uniforms and accoutrement left over from the Civil War or the Indian Wars. Many wore dark blue wool uniforms and carried Springfield rifles that used black powder (while Spanish troops used smokeless powder).

On May 26, Secretary of War Russell A. Alger ordered General William Shafter to load 25,000 men and equipment on transports in Tampa, Florida, army headquarters for the Cuban expedition. Not until June 8 would the poorly planned and chaotic embarkation begin. The expedition left Tampa on June 14 and arrived offshore of Cuba three days later, where they waited on board for another five days until their first landing.

On June 22, the army began its landing at Daiquiri, fifteen miles east of Santiago, the intended target of the Cuban campaign. The landing could have very well ended in disaster for American forces if the Spanish had made an effort to repel the invasion. Strong Spanish fortifications, commanding bluffs surrounding the beaches, rugged terrain, open waters, choppy surf, and 12,000 seasoned Spanish soldiers awaited U. S. forces, and could have inflicted heavy casualties, but they chose to withdraw. The landing, moreover, was as chaotic as the embarkation in Tampa. The remainder of the landings occurred at nearby Siboney, which became the main American base for the assault on Santiago.

The Rough Riders

The Cuban Campaign

On June 24, at the village of Las Guasimas, the army faced its first test under fire. Led by Major General Joseph Wheeler, a distinguished ex-Confederate general known as “Fighting Joe” Wheeler, American troops, encountering a murderous Spanish fire and suffering twice as many casualties, dislodged Spanish forces threatening U. S. base camps. In the heat of the melee, as the Spanish began retreating, Wheeler rose and shouted, “Come on! We’ve got the damned Yankees on the run!” Despite the rather hasty and ill-planned attack, American forces escaped a potential bloodbath and sent the Spanish retreating towards Santiago. Although pleased by the victory, Shafter warned against making any more such foolish charges.

The major assault on the outskirts of Santiago began one week later. The American command planned a two-pronged assault: five thousand American troops would attack five hundred Spanish at the village of El Caney, and nine thousand American troops were to take the San Juan heights. At El Caney, the Spanish stubbornly resisted, and American forces suffered far more casualties, but the village was finally taken after a courageous charge by the 25th (Negro) Infantry Regiment. The assault on the heights surrounding Santiago, at San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill, has been far more celebrated in the lore of American military history. As U. S. troops forded the San Juan River at the base of the heights, they came under murderous fire. With little or no cover and after taking heavy casualties, American officers believed that charging the Spanish entrenchments would be no less dangerous. Led by the flamboyant Colonel Teddy Roosevelt, the First Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the “Rough Riders,” and a contingent of men who had been separated from their units, indeed charged entrenched Spanish forces. American troops succeeded in dislodging the Spanish but only after Gatling guns were brought in to rake the Spanish trenches. The assault proved costly for the Americans, suffering over one hundred killed in action and over a thousand wounded. Until reinforcements arrived later the next day, American troops maintained a tenuous hold on the heights above Santiago. A Spanish counterattack would have certainly succeeded. Courage and tenacity — and a fair amount of luck — had once again led to American victory.

Throughout the remainder of the Cuban campaign, the blundering inefficiency of the high command, a serious deficiency in artillery, and the energetic resistance of the Spanish consistently spelled potential disaster for the American war effort. But the courage and hardiness of the American troops prevailed. The army won every engagement with Spanish forces, and in many of the battles U. S. troops suffered heavier casualties. Only the will of U. S. troops to advance in the face of withering fire and certain peril to life or limb, and to take a ridge, a hill, or a village at all cost, determined the course of the war. Without such bravery, the Spanish-American War would have been anything but a “splendid little war.”